THE SOBERING '70s

'A RICH VEIN OF GOOD NEWS'

The '70s decade is bound to be remembered for such inglorious events as Vietnam, Watergate, 'stagflation,' and a dearth of far-sighted political leadership. It was an age when some of our fondest illusions were swept away — a difficult and transitional period which may prove to be the beginning of new wisdom. True, there may be more uncertainities about energy, the economy, third-world turbulence, and governmental incapacity now than 10 years ago. But we have also discovered the realities of interdependence, the limits of government, a growing concern with global human-rights, and a new growth ethic. The difference may very well be that we can now see how to think our way out of the situation that we have created. First of a series.

By Harlan Cleveland
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We will shortly bid the 1970s good-bye. Most of the people I know are quite ready to say "good riddance" on New Year's Eve to a decade which Americans are bound to remember for Vietnam, Watergate, "stagflation," and an embarrassing poverty of political leadership.

Yet if you dig just beneath the surface of events, you will find a rich vein of good news.

As the decade began, we were preoccupied with multiple dangers — from nuclear war, from the mindless march of modern technology, from the proliferation of oppressive regimes, from the apparently widening gap between population and resources, and from a growth ethic that seemed to produce each year uglier cities, more impoverished land, more intractable human poverty, and a thickening cloud of pollutants in our daily experience.

We were also living with some dubious illusions — that our national economy could be "fine tuned," that the dollar was fundamentally strong, that the global drive for human rights could be safely palliated and otherwise ignored, that others might be dependent on us but we weren't interdependent with them, that we might have to bargain with the rest of the world, but we didn't have to share, and that our institutions were capable of coping with the exponential growth of scientific complexity.

As we now face the 1980s some of the most dangerous trends have been sharply and surprisingly reversed, and

some of our fondest illusions have been swept away. Together, these shifts may be the beginning of a new wisdom.

Not wholly at random, I will mention five reversible trends and five forgettable fancies — in all, 10 happenings in the sobering '70s that could make the 1980s a decade of hope and promise:

1. We turned off the war in Vietnam — by losing it. We never even considered using our nuclear arsenal to change that outcome. A superpower learned that military strength alone is no guarantee against becoming, as Stanley Hoffman puts it, "Gulliver tied, or the biggest fly on the flypaper."

SALT I and II are not yet the beginning of disarmament, but they codify that astonishingly stable, if unattractive, form of peace called mutual deterrence — what Winston Churchill called "two scorpions in a bottle," a balance of power based on parallel uncertainties in the face of unprecedented weaponry. Even though the world is still spending 8 percent more on arms than on educating a billion children, we have started to put a lid on the scale of warfare — by inventing history's first unusable weapon.

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2. The worm has turned on science and technology. The idea used to be that if we could think it up, we should surely manufacture and deploy it. But this "inner logic" of technological change is being shoved aside by the notion that the future directions and purposes of technology are matters for social determination — that is, for us the people to decide.

The watershed was the decision not to build a US supersonic airliner, despite the French/British decision to go ahead with the Concorde. (Before the decade ended the French and British had cooled off on the idea too.) The environmental movement's shouts of "Hey, wait a minute!" began in the '70s to drown out technology's inner logic: NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act, came into effect on Jan. 1, 1970. The deal with the Soviets not to make any more antiballistic missile systems, even though both sides had developed prototypes, was another straw in the same wind. So is the dwindling enthusiasm for nuclear energy as a way to make electricity, and the tightening regulation of carcinogenic foods and drugs.

The new public attitude can be caricatured. The City Council of Cambridge, Massachusetts, caricatured it by asserting municipal jurisdiction over the pace and direction of genetic research at Harvard University. But a caricature not only exposes a prominent feature to ridicule; it calls attention to a feature's prominence.

3. We have seen an invigorated international human-rights movement, a fusion of demands for political rights with demands for the meeting of basic human needs, in an invigorated international human-rights movement. The way a government treats its own people, issues of fairness in the "domestic politics" of nation states, used to be considered privileged, protected by sovereignty. But in the surprising '70s, the President of the United States could stand in the UN General Assembly and declare that "No member of the United Nations can claim that mistreatment of its citizens is solely its own business." Mr. Carter was talking, he made clear,

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not only about torture of political prisoners but about "unwarranted deprivation" of the poor. Nobody jeered.

The wobbly launching of the Carter human-rights initiative (its impact on arms-control negotiations, the President said later, was a surprise) should not obscure its historic quality. To fuse, as the President has fused, three kinds of human rights — the political rights the state can assure by simply not oppressing its citizens, the civil rights which require the state's affirmative action, and the economic and social entitlements expressed in the 1970s phrase "basic human needs" — provides a strong doctrinal basis for the world's first truly global revolution. All the previous revolutions (including the Christian, the Muslim, and the Marxist) have had to settle for primary influence only in one or another world region.

4. The race between world population and world resources doesn't look nearly as scary in 1979 as it did in 1970 — or even in 1972, when "The Limits to Growth" was published.

What then appeared as an exponential explosion of the population now seems more to resemble the familiar biological S-curve. Early in the decade, demographers could snatch headlines, sell books, and be taken seriously if

they predicted the world's population would grow to 7 1/2 or even 8 billion by the year 2000. The current UN projection does not even reach 6 billion by then. The forecasters had committed the original statistical sin of mistaking current trends for destiny. They were mousetrapped by countervailing trends: development, chemicals, women's instincts, and hope all proved hard to fit into a computer program.

Two billion more mouths to feed and a million (?) more jobs to create — these are not trivial tasks to accomplish in a 6bort generation. But they might just be manageable. The assignment implied, by the earlier projections looked so discouraging, they produced all that nonsense about lifeboats and triage.

Or the resources side of the equation, we have also gained in knowledge, insight, and wisdom during the 1970s. The early-'70s fright about limits to growth was a useful wake-up tonic. But it soon became evident that the problem was not a shortage of resources as such but a shortage of imagination, institutions, and political will to control our human selves in using the earth's rich and versatile endowments.

We learned that there would be plenty even of the nonrenewable fossil fuels and hard minerals, if conserving attitudes and international cooperation were not in such short supply.

Beyond the nonrenewables lies a hugely underutilized biomass (one-fifth of it microorganisms, an inconceivably numerous army of workers now underemployed in making cheese and in fermentation), plus a supply of solar radiation which is for practical purposes inexhaustible. These renewable resources are disproportionately available in the world's tropical regions, which are home for most of the absolutely poor.

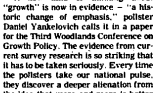
And beyond the physical and biological resources, information has in the 1970s come to be regarded as a resource too. It's not marginal. Dr. Peter Drucker, a management expert, says it's now the key resource in our business economy. "It's not scarce: Dr. Lewis Branscomb, chief scientist of the International Business Machines corporation, says information "is in quantitative surplus.

"To be sure, there are great gaps in human knowledge that have yet to be filled by research and study. But the yawning chasm is between what some have learned, yet others have not yet put to use."

We are, it now seems, not about to "run out of" resources — because we are changing our ways of thinking about resources.

5. A new growth ethic is emerging. We the people are changing our minds about the very purposes of life and work.

The old ethic was rapid material growth — powered by technological innovation, supported by an exuberant optimism, measured and symbolized by gross national product, that grotesque index which treats food production and drug addiction as equally valid signs of economic health. In reaction against the environmental and social impacts of growth guided mostly by marketplace demand, we had a brief flirtation with no-growth as an alternate philosophy. But we broke it off as soon as we tried no-growth in the recession of the mid-'70s, and especially



when we saw how little could be done about achieving more equity, at home or abroad, without an increment of economic growth to assist in its redistribution.

A new kind of thinking about "growth" is now in evidence — "a historic change of emphasis," pollster Daniel Yankelovich calls it in a paper for the Third Woodlands Conference on Growth Policy. The evidence from current survey research is so striking that it has to be taken seriously. Every time the pollsters take our national pulse, they discover a deeper alienation from the idea that more and more is better and better.

A majority of Americans (55 percent) say that "doing without something and living a more austere life would be a good thing." By 79 percent to 17 percent Americans think more stress should be placed on "teaching people to live with basic essentials" than on "reaching a higher standard of living." By a similar margin (76 percent to 17 percent) Americans would place greater stress on "learning to get our pleasure out of nonmaterial experiences" than "satisfying our need for more goods and services."

What people say to a poll taker is not a very accurate predicter of what they will do in real life — as we know from election results. Also, people are much more willing to counsel restraint in the behavior of others than to practice it themselves — the sluggish progress in energy conservation bears witness. (As manager of a university system I was always struck with the amount of litter left behind by students after a demonstration in favor of a cleaner environment.)

But the survey research findings about attitudes toward "growth" are so lopsided and so consistent that Mr. Yankelovich, after reviewing all the data from Gallup, Roper, Harris, and his own firm, summed it up this way:

"A new synthesis is forming, one that meshes three elements: the pursuit of economic stability (even at the cost of reduced consumption) with more modest material expectations and with the drive to establish maximum control over one's own destiny. The combination of these three elements creates a novel American outlook."

President Carter, in his energy speech in July 1979 was beginning to march to the same drummer: "...owning things and consuming things," he said on national television, "is no substitute for meaning."

6. A new economic theory is emerging. We have begun, in the 1970s, to realize we need a new, wider, more flexible and more compassionate general theory of employment, interest, and money than either economist Milton Friedman's monetarism and Keynesian "fine tuning," seem able to provide.

For most of the decade inflation and recession have remained glued together at one end of a business cycle whose oscillations don't even seem to be cyclical, and repeatedly stump the experts. Governments that use reflation to create more jobs sometimes succeed in creating more inflation and unemployment too. Governments that tighten the money supply sometimes succeed in inducing recession without bringing inflation under

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By a staff photographer

control. And governments which, like the US, try to yank both levers at once have to admit — as President Carter candidly did on national television not long ago — that contemporary economic theory fails to explain the way the real world works, and why.

In the long run, it turned out, Keynesian economics no longer applied. But — here's the good news — the bankruptcy of economic theory leaves room for a new economics in which fairness, human needs, and human purposes are not treated as externalities in a search for macro-economic "equilibrium."

7. The "North-South" dialogue has blossomed. During the decade of the '70s, the world's "North-South" relations — commerce and confrontation between the industrial nations and the developing nations — became the most dynamic engine in world politics. More and more it drives those other relations which used to occupy center stage in US foreign policy: our Atlantic and Pacific alliances and our relations with the Soviet Union. We do not encounter the Soviets in Berlin and the Mediterranean these days; we run into them in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and Africa and the Caribbean.

The motive power for this new kind of politics is rapid change in the developing "South." It contains a new explosive factor: the collision of Western "modernization" with traditional cultures and with untraditional aspirations for economic growth with equity.

This triple collision was dramatized for us by the televised revolution in Iran. The mullahs in their long robes were spurred by a Paris-based leader communicating with them by audiocassette. They teamed up with left-wing students in the streets of Tehran who set fire to tanks and automobiles — the hardware, and also the symbols, of modernization. But the three forces that collided to produce the turnover in Iran are present, in widely differing tactical forms, in the politics of a hundred societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

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And where is the silver lining in this political cloudburst from the "South"? Americans have a long record of adjusting to realities, and the reality of poverty and discrimination in undeveloped countries is gradually – too gradually – being accepted as a fact in US politics, not just because of oil imports and food exports but because claims for "fairness" and "basic human needs" resonate in the American political psyche.

As the US gets serious about facilitating development, Americans will take an ever-growing interest in fairness inside, not just among, nations. And that, too, is good news for the poorest of the poor.

If the US turns its back on world poverty, the world poverty that made it to center stage during the 1970s will make the 1980s a dangerous passage for the only nation with a truly global reach.

8. The reality of interdependence does seem to have sunk in. The idea was hard for Americans to grasp because everyone else seemed to want our aid, our technology, our weapons, our blue jeans, our hard rock music, and our TV programs. We were not equally clear that we needed an inflow of energy, of minerals, of investment, of brains, and of international cooperation.

Once the Arab oil embargo brought the matter to our attention in 1973, we were quick learners. By the decade's end "interdependence" was already a cliché. A remarkable number of Americans now understand that it got cold too soon in the Ukraine and a few months later Russian wheat purchases had pushed up the price of a loaf of bread at the corner supermarket; that the disappearance of anchovies off the west coast of Latin America shrank the supply of protein so that soybeans became scarce; that the burning of oil and coal pushes more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and risks overheating the world of our grandchildren.

Cognition of interdependence has been helped along by the cooperation that is so obviously required for international air travel and the control of international terrorism. It is reinforced by the satellite technologies for weather observation, telecommunication, resource sensing, and even military reconnaissance.

The single greatest instrument of education for a global perspective is probably those satellite photos that now routinely appear as part of the evening newscast. If you now ask the man on the street what the weather is going to be, he will no longer look at the sky or wet his finger or feel his joints, but tell you in semiprofessional language about the cold front coming in over Canada, which will arrive in his community at a predictable time. Everyone has the tools to visualize how the weather develops – and to understand, without being "taught," that events are interconnected, nations are interdependent, and the biosphere is more or less round.

9. The '70s have seen the dawn of planetary politics. It started with the UN's Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, and continued in Bucharest on world population, Rome on world food, Mexico City on the status of women, Buenos Aires on world water resources, Nairobi on desertification and, just two months ago, a conference in Vienna on science and technology for development.

These consciousness-raising sessions are not to be judged by the pale and wordy compromises they issue as "plans of action" just before the delegates leave for home. They are devices for forcing national governments to pay attention to neglected subjects. And they work. Before Stockholm, no nation had a cabinet-level ministry mandated to protect the natural environment; now, seven years later, there are 72. Before Bucharest, many developing nations were denying that population was a problem, or claiming that the excitement on the subject was a conspiracy to withhold help from the poor. Today the population policy of every nation is an accepted topic of international discourse.

The recognition of global risks and the presence of global technologies creates a new kind of politics to which the adjective international, the traditional fear of "losing" sovereignty, and win-lose scenarios simply don't apply. When it comes to assessing environmental risk, controlling epidemic diseases, collecting data about the envelope of atmosphere around the globe, channeling appropriate investment from one country to another, or inventing appropriate technologies for development, the institutions are likely to be transnational. Sovereignty is not "lost" but exercised by being pooled, as in the World Weather Watch. And alternative scenarios tend to find either both sides winners or both losers. The resulting politics is something new under the sun. In a world preoccupied with international conflict, that has to be good news.

10. We have discovered the limits to government. We have found a shortcoming in what has been regarded, for two generations past, as the most important instrument for getting things done in the public interest. In the US, the straws in this wind are clumsy initiatives – California's Proposition 13 and the proposed constitutional amendment on balancing the budget. But underneath them is another of these tidal waves of the 1970s.

In global perspective, we can see that power is leaking out of national governments in three directions at once: from the top as sovereignty has to be pooled to secure global benefits or ward off global risks; from the sides, as transnational enterprise (profit and nonprofit) performs many cross-border functions better than governments or intergovernmental organizations are able to do; and from the bottom, as local authorities adopt "growth policies" and "population policies" in an effort to take control of their own destinies.

In the perspective of US history, we are witnessing the end of the New Deal, the end of an era in which, if you had a major problem, the solution was to establish another government agency and throw money at the problem. Let's not knock it; the system worked pretty well for more than 40 years, from Franklin Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson. But a majority of Americans now seem to be persuaded – the polls are overwhelmingly clear about it – that their collective purposes can be served by measures other than expanding public regulation and government spending.

People-in-general, perceptive as usual, have noticed that something is wrong. By overwhelming margins current survey research records a rapid decline in the people's confidence that their government can do very much that is effective about what bothers them. In 1964 a 69 percent majority of the American public had faith in the competence of government leaders – that is, they would agree with the poll taker's statement "they know what they're doing." By 1976 the ratio of Americans holding this view had dropped to 44 percent; by 1978 it had dropped to 40 percent. At the end of the 1950s, a 56 percent majority of the public agreed that "you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right most of the time." Two decades later this index of public trust had been cut almost in half, to 29 percent.

This state of affairs is presented as tragic news in TV newscasts and newspaper editorials, and sometimes in the commentary of the survey researchers themselves. But I read these polls somewhat differently.

The fact is that our institutions are not coping. The government doesn't know what to do about the non-Keynesian fusion of inflation and recession. Many business leaders – one does not have to look farther than steel, or small cars, or color television – do seem to have lost that old spirit of American enterprise. Labor unions and other special-interest groups can't be trusted to put the general welfare ahead of their specialized welfare. If in these circumstances people were nevertheless persuaded that our leaders have the situation well in hand and told the pollsters that everything was fine, wouldn't they be seriously mistaken?

So, maybe, the perception that our institutions are not coping is the beginning of a new wisdom.

You will notice that these examples of allegedly good news, all 10 of them, are essentially changes in our way of thinking about the dangers and uncertainties that beset us. The objective "facts" of international life are no less threatening now than they were a decade ago. There are, indeed, more and bigger weapons, more morally ambiguous scientific discoveries, more political prisoners, more absolute poor, more obstacles to better production and fairer distribution of goods, more uncertainties about energy, more baffled economists, more third-world turbulence, more unavoidable interdependence, more technologies that require the pooling of sovereignty, and more governmental incapacity in 1979 than in 1969. The difference is that we can now see how to think our way out of the mess we are in.

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Next: Decade of dreams, crisis, adjustments